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"I FORGOT."

BY TOM P. MORGAN IN GOLDEN DAYS.

Probably "I forgot," was the one sentence most often on the lips of Sam Jarrett. Sometimes he said, "I didn't think," which was as poor an excuse for the more or less disastrous results of his heedlessness as was "I forgot."

He forgot and left the bars down, and half a dozen wandering cattle held high carnival in the garden all night long, and in the morning the garden was a ruin.

He forgot to cover the stock well upon another occasion, and a prize calf was drowned.

His aunt was taken suddenly ill one afternoon, and Sam was dispatched post-haste to Neighbor Spink's for medicine. He ran all the way, to find the Spink boys, the Bravton boys and three Ledfords gathered about a half-grown badger.

The story of the animal's capture led to stories of other badgers. Presently the talk shifted somehow from badgers to dogs, and there were plenty of dog stories told.

And so it went on till the setting of the sun reminded Sam of his errand. By the time he reached home the medicine was not needed, his aunt having recovered without its aid; so the only unpleasant result of Sam's heedlessness was that his father escorted him out into the woodshed and bestowed upon him the sound strapping he deserved.

Sam's lapses were in number legion; but the one which caused the greatest upheaval in the Jarrett family was his forgetting and losing the youngest Jarrett at the county fair.

The youngest Jarrett was not a remarkable child, but he was much beloved by all the rest of the Jarretts. He was big enough to talk, and could run about nicely and as he was John Jarrett the second they called him "Junior."

Upon week days of no especial importance, Junior usually wore a little checkered gingham slip and a gingham sun-bonnet, but, on Sundays and holidays he was arrayed in the tiniest of trowsers, of which he was amazingly proud, boots with copper toes and a little strip of red leather around the top of each—of which he was prouder still—and a plaid waist with a broad collar.

And upon these special occasions, his yellow white hair was carefully combed into three curly twists, like little tunnels, one square on top of his little pate and one over each ear.

Then he was crowned with a tiny straw hat, set well back on his small head that his curls might be seen and admired of all men. And little Junior was clad in all this festal finery when Sam forgot and lost him.

The fair was held at the county town, twelve miles away, and lasted three days. All of the Jarretts but Lyman attended the whole of it, and visited their friends, the Blooms, who lived in town.

Lyman was the Jarrett next older than Sam, a steady, slow-going chap, who was as methodical as Sam was scatter-brained.

Lyman went to the fair the first day with the rest of the family, but did not enjoy himself very well. The jostling crowds, the blare of the band, the howling of the lemonade and taffy vendors, the clamor around the revolving swings, the speeding racers and the thousand and one other unaccustomed sounds and sights were all joys to Sam; but Lyman was of a more phlegmatic disposition anyway, and besides he had the ague, not badly but sufficiently bad to take the keen edge from off his enjoyment.

So, when the first afternoon was over, he decided to go home in the morning, and remain where he could dose and nurse his ague in peace and quiet.

To this his parents gave consent, his father telling him that if he desired to return to the fair he might mount one of the horses and come to town.

Upon the following morning, Lyman found a chance to catch a ride to within two miles of home and set off.

Sam was amazed that any one—even though afflicted with ague—having ears to hear and eyes to see should voluntarily absent himself from the fair. As for him, he enjoyed him self so much that it was four o'clock before he remembered that he had not eaten, his accustomed noon dinner, and it was not till night came and the crowd departed that he yielded to the demands of his appetite and lettook himself to the Bloom residence.

In spite of all he had seen and heard, he felt disappointed and cheated, because of a wonder he had failed to see and hear.

Dobby Blackwell had overtaken him and was bubbling over with an animated description of the wonderful doings and sayings of a ventriloquist, whose performance Sam had missed, because, at the time it occurred, he had been at the other side of the grounds, watching, wide eyed and open mouthed, the antics of a miserable dancing bear, directed by a wandering Italian.

According to Dobby's glowing account, the ventriloquist had vastly eclipsed the bear and Sam determined to let nothing stand in his way of seeing the wonderful man upon the morrow.

The ventriloquist did not appear during the following forenoon—that of the last day of the fair—and Sam was very much afraid he was not going to appear at all.

In the afternoon, the Jarretts' hostess, Mrs. Bloom, was a little ill, and Mrs. Jarrett remained at home with her.

Mr. Jarrett resolved not to visit the fair any more, but to attend to various business matters about town during the afternoon.

It was expected, of course, that Junior would remain with his mother, but to the arrangement he objected very strongly.

This was the first fair he had ever attended, and though most of it was beyond his childish comprehension, he enjoyed it all to the uttermost, and cried as if his heart would break, at the thought of staying away.

So it was decided that, if Sam would take very, very good care of the little fellow, and not lose sight of him for an instant, Junior might go.

Sam promised with all earnestness, and really meant every word of it; and off they started for the fair, Sam holding little Junior very firmly by the hand.

When they reached the grounds they trudged about for a while and then Junior's shorter legs began to tire.

So Sam seated him on a bench under one of the trees, and when, presently, the little chap was provided with a bag of peanuts, he was serenely happy.

It must be nearly time for the ventriloquist, Sam thought. He wandered off a little way and took a look into the poultry-coops, in the meantime keeping a watchful eye on Junior. The youngster did not stir from the seat, but munched the peanuts and swung his copper toes contentedly.

A short distance farther off a mendicant began grinding a hand organ, and thither Sam slowly drifted, still remembering to look back at little Junior occasionally, though the latter showed no signs of leaving the bench.

Still farther away, a jockey—a boy no larger than Sam—clad in flaming racing colors, was stopped by a juvenile friend, to whom he began bragging loudly, as boys will.

A crowd of youthful admirers immediately swarmed around him and Sam hurried to join them, casting one glance backward at Junior as he ran, and promising himself to go back to the child in a very little while. One minute later he had forgotten all about Junior.

Presently he was smartly nudged by Dobby Blackwell, who whispered in his ear:

"The Ventriloquist, come on!"

And off they ran, away over beyond the Agricultural Hall, Sam by this time having forgotten Junior as completely as if he had never existed. The ventriloquist was really only a fairly clever performer, whose entertainment was given simply to attract a crowd, to whom he would soon sell sundry bottles of nostrum; but to Sam, who had never before witnessed anything of the kind, he was a wonder-worker and his exhibition a marvel.

The mountebank took upon his knees two gaily-dressed wooden manikins, with smirking painted faces and mouths which opened and shut when the simple mechanism at the backs of their necks was manipulated. And these the ventriloquist by dint of talking in a queer falsetto voice and working their mouths at the proper moments, made to appear as if endowed with life.

They engaged in laughter-provoking dialogues and wrangles, and sang, cracked jokes, jabbered and whooped till Sam and Dobby Blackwell laughed till they almost cried.

Then another and entirely different voice, hoarse and muffled, broke in with a demand to be let out of the box near the professor's feet, and the ventriloquist opened the box and lifted out a most villainous-looking, wooden-headed Irishman, who immediately began to rail at the other manikins for disturbing his slumber.

And presently all three of the manikins were singing and wrangling and gabbling together, to the great delight of the boys. Then the ventriloquist placed all of the figures in the box out of sight and began to sell his nostrum to the great crowd he had attracted, and Sam and Dobby lingered, waiting to see what he would do next, till the sun sank and with the coming of dusk the ventriloquist closed his sales and began to take down his stand.

Then, as they turned reluctantly away at last, Sam suddenly recalled little Junior. Away he raced, with Dobby at his heels, to the bench where Junior had been left.

The little fellow was gone!

They hunted this way and that, and asked questions on every side but no trace of the missing child could they find.

Then when it became a certainty in their minds that Junior was lost and Sam had grown sorely frightened, Dobby Blackwell, who secretly blamed himself, deserted Sam and hurried homeward.

In vain Sam hunted hither and thither. No Junior could be found. And, finally, when that dusk had turned to darkness and the watchman, who had at length assisted him in his search, told the boy there was nothing left for him to do but to inform his parents, poor Sam was almost frantic.

Junior was lost, and he had lost him!

As he crept away through the darkness, Sam's eyes were moist and his throat dry and parched, as there arose in his thoughts the picture of how little Junior had looked when he took his last careless glance at him, sitting contentedly on the bench under the tree, with his little hat pushed back on his three little curls, munching the peanuts and swinging his copper toes.

Sam broke into a howl of anguish, and ran swiftly down the street toward the Bloom house.

He was gasping and sobbing when he burst into the room where his parents were, and choked out that little Junior was lost.

There was excited questions, weeping and hurrying hither and thither. Mr. Bloom went with Mr. Jarrett and Sam to the fair grounds, but nothing came of the search there.

After awhile they were joined by a small squad of citizens, which, by-and-by, had increased to a crowd.

All sorts of probable and improbable places were searched, but no clue to Junior's whereabouts was discovered.

There was little sleep in the Bloom house that night. Mrs. Jarrett was almost prostrated with grief. Mr. Jarrett was terribly anxious and Sam tossed and tumbled in his bed till almost morning in an agony of grief and self-accusation.

Next day all was excitement in the town. Mr. Jarrett had caused handbills, offering a reward for the return of Junior, to be printed and circulated broadcast. Search parties investigated every nook and corner, seemingly. The reporters interviewed everybody who knew or seemed to know anything bearing even remotely upon the affair. Boys scuttled hither and thither, or conversed in excited groups around the corners and behind buildings.

It came to be believed that Junior had been stolen, and several suspicious-looking but doubtless worthy persons were arrested by zealous officers, only to be released almost immediately; and, of course, all this added to the excitement, but none of it produced Junior.

It was a sad and sorrowful little party that drove homeward, the next afternoon, without having the comfort of a single clue as to the whereabouts of the lost child. Mr. Jarrett, who had left matters in Mr. Bloom's hands while he took his family home, looked sad and discouraged; Mrs. Jarrett's eyes were swollen with weeping, and Sam sobbed most of the way home.

It did not seem like going home. Little Junior would not be there! And then there was Lyman to tell. And, oh—

The wagon turned the corner, an eighth of a mile away from home, and the house and its surroundings were in plain view.

Then the three sad-hearted occupants of the vehicle caught sight of some one perched on the gate-post—some one whose little sun-bonnet had fallen back from his head and fluttered behind him, held by the strings tied under his chin.

"Why—why—" began Mr. Jarrett. And the little figure on the gate-post gave a baby whoop of delight at the sight of them, and Lyman came around the house and lifted him down off the post.

"It's Junior!" yelled Sam.

And Junior it was, safe and sound. In less than two minutes the little fellow was tightly hugged in his mother's arms. There were hurried questions and answers, and then the truth came out. Lyman had concluded, after all, that he would like to return to the fair, and had mounted the horse and gone. He arrived there a short time after Sam had deserted Junior.

After wandering about the grounds for a while, he had felt a chill coming on, and began to lose all interest in the fair.

Just then he came upon Junior, playing with the numerous children of a motherly looking Swedish woman, quite a distance from the bench upon which Sam had left him.

"Want to do home," said Junior. "So do I," assented Lyman.

"Did any one leave him in your charge?" he asked of the woman.

She understood very little English, and so she simply answered "Yah," which really meant nothing in particular in this case.

"Tam wuoned off and left me," piped Junior. "Want to do home!"

"Well, when he comes back, will you please tell him I have taken Junior home?" asked Lyman, thinking he was doing the proper thing.

"Yah," answered the Swede woman, not comprehending.

And so Lyman had taken Junior away with him. And they had had a very satisfactory time at home, in total ignorance of the commotion the little lad's disappearance had caused.

When all the points in the case had come out, Sam said, very meekly: "I forgot!"

But that did not save him from receiving the soundest strapping of his life. Whether it was the remembrance of the strapping or of his distress at the loss of little Junior that worked the change, I know not; but, after that, Sam thought more and forgot less, till now he rarely has occasion to say "I forgot!"

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